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Witch Belief in Scottish Coastal Communities

Lizanne Henderson

Why look at coastal witches?

Every culture defines its witches in particular ways. What a witch was, and of what he or she were thought capable, exhibited degrees of variation across Early Modern European societies. The basic threats practitioners of witchcraft presented appear to be universally shared – such as causing hurt, death, infertility, damage, destruction, and interpersonal conflict – though the specific characteristics can differ across cultures and geographical regions. Many of those differences are closely related to the means of subsistence. In a Scottish context, focus has tended to be given to inland Lowland farming communities and the alleged interference of witches with dairy production, and injury or death of livestock. However, fishing villages seem also to have contributed more than their fair share of witches. The coastal communities of Ayrshire, Aberdeenshire, Buchan, East Lothian, and Fife were all major suppliers, while a significant number of accused within the Highland region also came from coastal parishes. In the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, maritime issues, such as the sinking of ships, drownings, or depletion of fish stocks, were occasionally ascribed to the actions of witches.¹

Christina Larner posited that, “witch-beliefs represent a direct inversion of the values of the society in which they are held”.² Examining the witch beliefs of a given country, region or community can, in other words, provide important insights into inherent social values, mindsets and cultural attitudes. Was there anything distinctive about witches from Scottish coastal communities, in comparison with inland communities? We must first establish what the nature of

¹ Lizanne Henderson, *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment: Scotland, 1670-1740*, (Basingstoke, 2016) 68.

² Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland*, (London, 1981) 134.

³ Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database (2003), published to the Internet at: www.shc.ed.ac.uk/witches/

⁴ Lizanne Henderson, “Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the Gàidhealtachd”, *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland: The Scottish Witchcraft Database*, (Maidenhead, 1994) 13.

witch belief was in the coastal zones? Witchcraft was a punishable crime in Scotland between 1563 and 1736, and so it might also be asked if the charges levied against suspected coastal witches and the nature of their magical crimes, were in any way distinct? Did the Devil and the demonic feature strongly in these accusations and confessions? What was the relationship between coastal witchcraft and understandings of the natural world? For instance, were weather related phenomena or climate disruption – especially when leading to storms at sea or interference with ships and fisheries – a particular feature of coastal cases, or has it simply been assumed that it was? Did coastal witches have any particular affinity with animals (wild or domestic); either as shapeshifters into animal form, or by employing animals as supernatural helpers, or an ability to heal or harm particular species? Was there a discernable gap between etic (outsider) and emic (insider) perspectives towards witch beliefs as found in coastal settlements? For instance, were inhabitants of coastal communities considered to be more ‘superstitious’ than those who lived in inland communities?

Distinguishing the Coastal Witch

Scotland’s experience of the witch-hunts, with a known 3,837 official witch accusations, makes it one of the worst affected nations in Europe.³ Not all parts of Scotland were influenced in the same way, or to the same extent, by the witch-hunts. Witch belief, on the other hand, was widespread and fairly ingrained in the Early Modern psyche. That said, there was a far greater preponderance of witch persecution from the agriculturally-rich Lowlands, while the Highlands escaped the worst of the witch-hunts, though, as I have argued elsewhere, not to the degree as other writers have previously suggested.⁴ The greatest concentration of trials occurred in Edinburgh, the Lothians, Fife and Aberdeenshire.

However, as Larner points out, “other places which regularly supplied witches were fishing villages. The connection of witchcraft . . . with disasters at sea made these places natural areas for witch-hunts”.⁵ Lawrence Normand and Gareth

³ Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database (2003), published to the Internet at: www.shc.ed.ac.uk/witches/

⁴ Lizanne Henderson, “Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the *Gàidhealtachd*”, *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, eds. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke, 2008) 95-118.

⁵ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 82.

Roberts concur, pointing out “in seafaring villages witches are commonly accused of sailing and sinking ships”.⁶ A later part of the chapter will return to these notions that coastal zones were “natural areas” for witchcraft or that ship-sinking was a “common” accusation against witches from such locations. A number of trials and confessions could, to varying degrees, potentially fall under the umbrella of “coastal” and so what follows is a select sample, chosen to demonstrate a range of experiences, characterizations and motifs. I have loosely defined “coastal witch” primarily on the basis of three criteria: the witch suspect’s place of residence and its close proximity to the sea; on their community’s reliance upon a fishing economy or shipping industry; or, on the maritime nature of their alleged crimes. The actual place of trial or execution is less relevant.

North Berwick coven: James VI, 1589-1591

The first major, large-scale witch-hunt in Scotland began with a shipwreck, storms at sea, and a series of suspicious maritime mishaps. The details surrounding the North Berwick coven are rather complex but essentially the root of the problem began when at least three attempts to sail Princess Anne of Denmark, the new wife of King James VI, to Scotland were met with setbacks, due to gale force winds and the ship, the *Gideon* repeatedly springing leaks which required it to return to Norway for repairs. Meanwhile, in Scottish waters, the stormy seas sank a ship sailing between Burntisland and Leith, which had been carrying Jean Kennedy, former lady-in-waiting of James’s mother, Mary Queen of Scots, whom he had sent for to become one of Anne’s ladies-in-waiting.

During the subsequent interrogations it emerged that the various maritime disruptions had allegedly been the work of a coven of Scottish and Danish witches operating with the assistance of the Devil. James VI’s own cousin, Francis Stewart Hepburn, 5th Earl of Bothwell, was implicated as part of a wider conspiracy to bring down the king. Bothwell was almost certainly set-up, and the fact that he was the lord high admiral or vice-admiral, nominally responsible for the royal fleet that brought the King and his new bride back from Denmark, put him in a vulnerable position. Bothwell was officially charged with witchcraft in 1591, tried and

⁶ Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, eds., *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI’s Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*, (Exeter, 2000) 63.

acquitted in 1593, but, his problems far from over, he was excommunicated in 1595, living out the end his days in poverty on the continent.⁷

Two of the primary suspects, Geillis Duncan and Agnes Sampson gave, under torture, corroborating confessions as to their part in the events. Duncan explained how meetings between Scottish and Danish witches had taken place in the middle of the Forth, and how she had often been aboard ships in company with the Devil who gave her wine and told her that the “Michaelmass storm” would “do mickle scathe [great damage] both by sea and land”.⁸ Duncan claimed she spent forty-eight hours at sea with her coven and the Devil aboard *The Grace of God*, “a boat which flew like a swallow”. Sampson confessed that they sank this ship at North Berwick.⁹ Some twenty women, explained Sampson, sailed out to *The Grace of God* on a boat “like a chimney”,¹⁰ powered by some of the women who “rowed with oars”. This activity may have been viewed as irregular in itself, a reversal of roles of women behaving like sailors. On arriving at the ship, Sampson recounted that “the Devil brought out from the bottom of the ship wine and other cheer” and “when they departed from the ship the Devil remained himself under the ship’s bottom”. Immediately after disembarking an “evil wind blew and the storm rose whereby the ship perished”. Excursions such as this one were apparently common, Sampson claiming that she and her fellow witches regularly sailed to and from North Berwick on their riddles, or sieves.¹¹

Many of the interrogations were taken up with questions regarding Anne of Denmark’s ill-fated voyages. Details emerged of a ritual that involved baptizing a cat by passing it three times through a chimney crook, taking said cat to the pier-head at Leith around midnight, and uttering the following words, “See that there be no deceit among us”, while throwing the cat into the sea. Another key suspect, John Fian, school-master in Prestonpans, reported attendance at North Berwick

⁷ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 35, 39-49; Edward J. Cowan, “The Darker Vision of the Scottish Renaissance: the Devil and Francis Stewart”, *The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland: Essays in Honour of Gordon Donaldson*, eds. Ian B. Cowan and Duncan Shaw (Edinburgh, 1983) 125-40.

⁸ The Feast of St Michael, or Michaelmas, 29 September, falls close to the equinox, marking the end of the productive season and the beginning of autumn. It is also a time of year well known for storms and high seas.

⁹ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 138-9, 144.

¹⁰ It is unclear exactly what Sampson meant by “chimney” but can assume it was some sort of magically adapted form of sailing transportation.

¹¹ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 149, 238.

conventions, of being carried out to sea in company with Satan and a retinue of other witches, and of foreknowledge of the leaks that sprang up on Anne of Denmark's ship. He admitted to playing a part in the "raising of winds at the King's passing to Denmark" and delivering a cat to a fellow witch to be thrown into the water with the words "Cast the same in the sea! Hola". Upon the king's homecoming, Fian attempted to wreck the king's ship by hurling a football-like object into the ocean creating a cloud of mist to rise up from the surface of the water. During a coven meeting at Broomhill, Fian recalled how the Devil commanded all present to take cats and throw them into the sea in order "to raise winds for destruction of ships and boats".¹²

Duncan, Sampson and Fian, among others, were accused of much more besides, and all were found guilty and executed. King James, who had taken part in some of the interrogations was so deeply affected by these experiences that he went on to write a treatise called *Daemonologie* (1597) about the threat witchcraft posed. On the topic of storm-raising, a subject that must have been of particular interest to him, he surmised, witches "can raise storms and tempests in the air either upon sea or land, though not universally, but in such a particular place and prescribed bounds as God will permit them so to trouble". Moreover, the Devil their master would have no problem controlling the air "being a spirit, and having such power of the forming and moving thereof".¹³ The notion that God, or the Devil, must first grant permission for witches to affect a storm is fairly consistent with wider European demonological discourse. However, the wording of James's text suggests that there are particular places in the landscape, and indeed the seascape, that God has already allocated or "prescribed" for this purpose. He is, therefore, theorizing an intermingling of a natural and supernatural landscape/seascape, the "prescribed bounds" of which are presumably undetectable by ordinary humans until something bad or unusual happens, such as a sudden fog or mist, or the sinking of a ship.

The Witches of Eyemouth, 1634

The 1634 trial of Elizabeth Bathgate, from the fishing port of Eyemouth, is fairly well documented. Remarkably, Bathgate, who had lived with a reputation for

¹² Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 151, 153, 228, 230.

¹³ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 395.

witchcraft for over thirty-years was, in the end, acquitted of all eighteen articles presented against her, which included keeping a horseshoe (given to her by the Devil) within a “secret part of her door”, killing both a child with an enchanted egg and a cow through bewitchment. She also kept company with a “notorious warlock” and with the Devil. It was alleged that Bathgate and her companions,

met upon the shore of Eyemouth under night and cruelly murdered David Hynd amongst them, who was watching the boats under night during the herring drove, for fear he should have discovered their unlawful actions and meeting.

Furthermore, it was suspected that

the panel [accused] and her associat witches being conveyed by the Devil from a meeting they had upon the shoar of Eyemouth into a ship wherein George Holdie in Eyemouth was with his company the panel and her accomplices cruelly sank and destroyed the ship wherein they all perished with the ship and goods.¹⁴

The evidence against Bathgate was insufficient to gain a conviction, though three of her associates were not so fortunate and were executed.

The Witches of Forfar, 1661

The confession of Helen Guthrie, whose trial took place in the market town of Forfar in 1661, contains a curious episode when herself and fellow convicted witches Isobell Shyrie and Elspet Alexander, about a week before St James Day (25 July), travelled to an ale house near Barry, situated on the mouth of the Tay (between Dundee and Carnoustie). There the women drank three pints of ale before heading onwards to the sands for an assignation with the Devil who appeared to them “in the shape of ane great horse”. The purpose of their tryst was to sink a ship “lying not farr off from Barrie”. Guthrie was appointed to,

tak hold of the cable tow, and to hold it fast until they did returne, and she herselfe did presentlie take hold of the cable tow, and that the rest with the divell went in to the sea upone the said cable as shee thought, and that about the spaice of an hour thereafter they returned all in the same likeness as befor, except that the divell was in the shape of a man upone his return and that the rest were sore traiked

¹⁴ Trial of Elizabeth Bathgate, 16 Dec 1633 to 4 June 1634, *Books of Adjournal*, JC2/7 fo. 148v, 154r, 160r-168; Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, *A Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland*, (London, 1884) 107-10; Larner, *Enemies of God*, 155, 182-4.

[fatigued] and that the divell did kiss them all except her selfe, and that he kist her hand only.

So late was the hour when their wicked business had concluded that the women could find no lodgings and were “forced to lye at ane dyke syde all night”. This was not the only time they met the Devil as they had attended other sabbat meetings where they danced and drank and received nips and cold kisses from their master who gave them all new names: Helen Guthrie was called the “White Witch”, Elspet Alexander was called Alison, and Isobell Shyrie was called the “Horse”, a reference to the Devil riding upon her like a horse “and that she was shoad lyke ane mare”. It was added that Shyrie’s hands were very sore the next day from this rough treatment. During her trial, Helen Guthrie’s character was called into question, describing her as a very “drunkensome woman” who led a very “wicked lyffe and conversatione, a terrible banner and curser”. Among the many charges levied against her, which included the murder of her half sister, the gathering at Barry was the only maritime-related crime. Another among their unholy crew, Elspeth Bruce, though not involved in the ship-sinking, took part in an inland meeting at the Bridge of Cortachy where “the divill and they reased ane great wind” to pull down and destroy the bridge. Albeit not maritime related, controlling the elements to destroy ships and bridges was a recognized part of this coven’s overall skill set.¹⁵

Isle of Bute, 1662

Disruption to sailing and the harvest of the sea features quite prominently in the Bute trials of 1662, especially as it affected the herring fishing. Margaret McLevin was able to calm rough seas and bring sailors home safely, but she also created a storm by casting a pebble into the sea with the intention of sinking a boat. On another occasion the Devil lifted McLevin up and carried her under his oxters (armpits) to the rocky isle of Inchmarnock. There they concocted a plan to sink a boat on its way to Arran but, McLevin revealed, this was prevented by God, who turned the boat onto another course and away from danger.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Register of the Privy Council*, 3rd ser., vol. 1, 122; G. R. Kinloch, “Confessions and Trials of the Witches of Forfar”, *Reliquae Antiquae*, (Edinburgh, 1848) 113-46.

¹⁶ J. R. N. MacPhail, ed., *Highland Papers*, (Edinburgh, 1920) 24; Lizanne Henderson, “The Witches of Bute”, *Historic Bute: Land and People*, ed. Anna Ritchie (Edinburgh, 2012) 151-

Pittenweem, 1704-5

The fishing village of Pittenweem played host to a truly dreadful incident on 30 January 1705 when suspected witch Janet Cornfoot escaped from prison but was captured and set upon by the villagers. Dragged by her heels through the streets to the harbour, she was stretched on a rope, which reached from a ship to the shore, and pelted with stones. Then she was dropped on to the beach, covered over with a door weighted with several heavy stones and pressed slowly to death.¹⁷

Cornfoot had been imprisoned on a specific charge made by Alexander MacGregor, a fisherman, that she, the Devil, and two other women had attacked him in the night while he was sleeping. The trouble seems to have originated with an argument between Patrick Morton, sixteen-year-old son of the local blacksmith, and fellow suspect Beatrix Laing. Morton had refused to make some nails for Laing as he was already busy with another job for a local fishing boat. After the row, Morton fell into a “possessed” state, experiencing severe bodily contortions and disturbed breathing. Morton claimed that Laing had cursed him and blamed her for his condition. Laing admitted to renouncing her baptism and entering into a compact with the Devil and was forced to name accomplices. Janet Cornfoot, a known charmer and a “woman of very bad fame”, was among those accused of assisting in the bewitchment of the blacksmith’s son. The nature of Cornfoot’s supposed crimes, though she was physically located within a coastal community, were not particularly coastal in design, though another of among the Pittenweem suspects, Isobell Adam, was implicated in the suspected murder of a local fisherman.¹⁸

Janet Horne, Dornoch, 1727

The ‘last execution’ for witchcraft in Scotland was in the seaside town of Dornoch, Sutherland, though the date has been disputed and the supposed incident is lacking in convincing documentation. Janet Horne was accused

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¹⁷ Henderson, *Witchcraft and Folk Belief*, 213-24; Anon, *An Answer of a Letter from a Gentleman in Fife*, (Edinburgh, 1705) 7-8.

¹⁸ Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560-1710*, (East Linton, 2002) 168.

of having ridden upon her own daughter, transformed into a poney, and shod by the devil, which made the girl ever after lame, both in hands and feet, a misfortune entailed upon her son, who was alive of late years. The grandmother was executed at Dornoch: and it is said, that after being brought out to execution, the weather proving very severe, she sat composedly warming herself by the fire prepared to consume her, while the other instruments of death were making ready.¹⁹

The reports surrounding Horne have the distinct feel of folktale and legend about them. Walter Scott reported the Countess of Sutherland had personally told him that she had dispensed charity to the daughter's lame son and had regretted the "everlasting shame" of the execution, relating that the daughter, a fishwife, "happened to have burnt her hands when a child, which contracted her fingers, and the common people ascribed that misfortune to her mother's witchcraft".²⁰ The implication seems to have been that credulity and superstition on the part of the "common people" were most to blame for Horne's demise, not, bizarrely, the court of law that would have condemned her.

Assessing the evidence

Based on this small sample of trials was Christina Larner's comment about fishing villages as "natural areas" to find witches correct? There are confessions, such as those from the North Berwick coven members, or Eyemouth witch Elizabeth Bathgate, that would support Larner's view that the sinking of ships was "a common malefice among witches in fishing towns and villages".²¹ However, other communities, such as Forfar, which is not a fishing village, could produce witches like Helen Guthrie who had the ability to sink ships. Elsewhere, Pittenweem was the fishing village in which Janet Cornfoot resided, but, although her problems began when a local fisherman accused her of attacking him while he slept, Cornfoot's supposed crimes were not maritime in nature. Location, it would seem, is not everything.

¹⁹ Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, "Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief", *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester, 2002) 198-217; Henderson, *Witchcraft and Folk Belief*, 233-40.

²⁰ Walter Scott, *Letters on Witchcraft and Demonology*, (1830; London, 2001) 272; Edmund Burt, *Letters from A Gentleman in the North of Scotland to His friend in London*, ed. A. Simmons (1754; Edinburgh, 1998) 124-7.

²¹ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 155.

Disruption to fisheries does appear to have been a consistent concern, replicated in different parts of the country, and for a very long time. For instance, a fisherman in Portmahomack was imprisoned in Dingwall as late as 1845 for cutting a woman “above the brow” because he blamed her for the loss of his nets and failure in fishing for herring, plus his crew refused to sail with him while he was under the witch’s curse. Such allegations are found elsewhere in northern Europe also, such as coastal Finnmark where witches were blamed with driving the fish away.²²

The Devil is a relatively conspicuous figure in this selection, often assuming the shape of an animal, such as a horse or dog, and present during the performance of magical acts to sink ships, summon storms, or generally entertain the witches with music, dancing and drinking. This is noteworthy as in many witch confessions his role is often less direct and understated. The physical presence of the Devil was not a requirement to gain a conviction, and indeed, in many confessions, the suspects do not explicitly name him or even mention him at all. That said, within the god-fearing, Calvinist culture of Scotland, his involvement must surely have been assumed. The precise role of the Devil in this small sample may, admittedly, be misleading but, impressionistically, it seems a diabolical presence formed a significant part of coastal witch lore.

Generally, the behaviour and activities of most inland Scottish witches were often highly localized and involved quite personal acts of harm and aggression, as opposed to wide-scale, anonymized acts of terror on the populace at large. Supernatural assaults were almost always targeted at particular individuals or families and not necessarily towards the whole community. Isobel Cockie in Aberdeenshire, for example, caused Alexander Anderson’s “bumper crop of barley to rot in the field, while his neighbours enjoyed successful harvests”.²³ Coastal witches, on the other hand, appear to have had superior control over weather-related magic and an ability to wreak havoc on a much bigger scale, in some instances this taking on monumental proportions, as demonstrated by the North Berwick witches who conspired with other covens against both king and country. Agnes Sampson’s terrifying revelation that the Leith coven was also working with

²² Cutting “above the brow” was a widespread technique to break a witch’s spell; Liv H. Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark*, (Leiden, 2013) 274.

²³ Edward J. Cowan, “The Devil’s Decade”, 80.

one at Prestonpans heightened their powers exponentially; “at their meeting they should make the storm universal throughout the sea”.²⁴ While interference with crops was “not nearly as common as one might expect, given that all the common folk of Scotland depended on these crops for subsistence”,²⁵ coastal witches were frequently blamed with the outright destruction of fish stocks. In Leith in 1645, for instance, convicted witch Helen Clark was accused of causing a storm in order to attack the fishing fleet. In this respect, Scottish coastal witches had more in common with the witches of France and Germany who plotted to destroy the entire community’s grain crops and wineries.²⁶

Most witchcraft historians are agreed that there was more than one kind of witch. Éva Pócs, working on the Hungarian evidence, distinguished three types of witch figure that she claimed were essentially the same as those identified by Christina Larner for Scotland. Type A, the “neighbourhood witch” or “social witch”, is associated with social or neighbourhood conflicts. Type B, the “magical” or “sorcerer” witch, have expertise in magic and sorcery. Type C, the “supernatural” or “night” witch, attacked his or her victims during the night or in dreams.²⁷ Scottish coastal witches could, potentially, be represented by one or more of these designations but I would like to instead suggest a fourth category, Type D, the elemental witch, for one who was particularly skilled in the manipulation of the natural world, the elements, the weather, and the produce of the sea.

Coastal witch motifs in folktale and legend

The relationship between motifs found in folktales and legends and those found in the witch trial confessions is strong.²⁸ The ability of witches to raise tempests and sink ships is a particularly good example. Among the charges against Margaret Barclay, wife of the burgess of Irvine, was the sinking of *The Gift of God* and the

²⁴ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 210.

²⁵ Julian Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft in its European Context”, *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, eds. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke, 2008) 26-50.

²⁶ Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft in its European Context”, 29.

²⁷ Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age*, (Budapest, 1999) 10-11.

²⁸ On the relationship between witch confessions and folk narrative, see Lizanne Henderson, “Witch, Fairy and Folktale Narratives in the Trial of Bessie Dunlop”, *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, Ed. L. Henderson (Edinburgh, 2009) 141-66, and Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, (London, 1996).

resultant death of most of its crew, including the provost of Irvine, Andrew Train. The bark was owned by her brother-in-law, John Dein, with whom she had fallen out. Indeed, Barclay had previously raised an action of slander against Dein and his wife who she claimed had wrongfully accused her of theft. The kirk session had, it was thought, reconciled the two parties but it emerged Barclay continued to bear a grudge against her in-laws and had been overheard imprecating a curse against Dein's ship, "that sea nor salt-water might never bear the ship, and that partans (crabs) might eat the crew at the bottom of the sea". During the subsequent investigation, a fellow suspect said he had seen Barclay at her home one night in the company of other women and a little black dog (the Devil). They were moulding the shape of a ship and making figures out of clay, one of which was supposed to symbolize Provost Train, while the other may have represented Dein. Once finished, they all went to the seaside whereupon the clay models were plunged into the sea, after which the "sea raged, roared and became red like the juice of madder in a dyer's cauldron". Barclay was found guilty of witchcraft and sorcery and executed in 1618.²⁹

The concept of storm-raising and ship-sinking by sorcery is an ancient theme dating back to Classical Greece. The *Alexander Romance* features a story about Egyptian Pharaoh Nectanebus performing a ritual to sink ships by moulding "ships and men of wax", which were then put in the bowl of spring water. He called upon the gods and "airy spirits and demons below the earth" to bring the wax figures to life then "sank the ships in the bowl, and straightaway, as they sank, so the ships of the enemy who were coming against him perished".³⁰

Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh has identified the essentials of this story as a migratory legend, which he calls 'The Ship-Sinking Witch' and has charted its appearance in coastal districts across much of north-western Europe since the sixteenth century. With minor differences in detail, "the rite is essentially the same as that used by Nectanebus some two thousand years before".³¹ The object used to

²⁹ Madder is an evergreen plant used to obtain red dye; Scott, *Letters on Witchcraft and Demonology*, letter nine, 187-92; *Register of the Privy Council*, vol. 11, pp. 336-7, 401;

³⁰ Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, "The Ship-Sinking Witch: A Maritime Folk Legend from North West Europe", *Béaloideas* 60/61 (1992/1993): 267-86.

³¹ The earliest record of the legend in northern Europe is 1583 in the proceedings of a witch trial in Norfolk, England. The accused allegedly sank a Spanish ship by means of a ritual that involved boiling eggs in a pail of cold water. Mac Cárthaigh, "The Ship-Sinking Witch", 269, 274.

imitate a ship in Irish and Scottish variants, is a wooden bowl, while the Scandinavian, and some Scottish variants, favour a seashell. To simulate a gale the water is either stirred or blown upon, sometimes accompanied with magical formulae or spoken words. The motive behind the spell in these legends can vary, such as in Ireland, Scotland and Iceland, it usually came as a result of unfair treatment or the denial of alms. In Scandinavian variants the seaborne enemies are attacked by the magic worker in order to protect the community. Another variant – common to Ireland, Scotland, Norway and Denmark – resembles the migratory legend ‘The Daughter of the Witch’ (ML 3035), wherein the daughter demonstrates the skills in the Black Arts she has learned from her mother.

Alan Bruford recorded a Shetland tale in which a beggarwoman, unhappy with the quality of wool she has been given, exacts revenge by attempting to sink three fishing boats by putting three horse mussel shells in a pool and pelting them with stones. In tales from the West of Scotland, witches appear on ships in the likeness of a cat or a raven to try and sink them, thus revealing maritime taboos against witches but also certain animal species. In a Hebridean variant, a daughter looking backwards through her legs is the method used to sink ships.³² A somewhat unusual variant was recorded in southwest Scotland in the early twentieth century. A Gaelic-speaking witch called Girzie McClegg, who allegedly lived quite far from the sea at Hannayston in the Kells in Galloway, was blamed with stealing butter, sucking milk from cows in the shape of a hare, and appeared as a cat walking on its hind legs. Anyone she disliked, she drowned by “sinking a caup [ale cup] in the yill-boat [ale barrel] in her kitchen”.³³

There are a number of other ways sympathetic magic is manifested within folktales and legends to bring about disasters at sea or affecting the weather, such as the manipulation of thread, driving a knife into the ship’s mast to raise the wind, undoing knots tied on a piece of rope or a handkerchief, or by studying the behaviour of cats to determine the course of a storm. There was also a widespread European folk belief that witches travelled on the sea in egg-shells, usually with the

³² Alan Bruford, *The Green Man of Knowledge*, (Aberdeen, 1982) 85-6; Mac Cárthaigh, “The Ship-Sinking Witch”, 277-8.

³³ R. deBruce Trotter, “No. III. The Witch of Hannayston”, *The Gallovidian* vol. 4, no. 13 (1902): 40-4.

intention of sinking ships, which gave rise to the custom of breaking eggs shells up before discarding them.³⁴

Cross-fertilization between folk belief and folk narrative can be demonstrated in these tales. In the Ship-Sinking Witch legend there was almost certainly a “two-way exchange of ideas between folk tradition and much of the accusations and confessions generated in the witch hunt”.³⁵ What is less clear is whether folk tradition influenced learned tradition, or the other way around? Were, for instance, the witches who confessed to having performed these types of rituals derived from stories known to them from folk tradition, or were these motifs and narratives being imposed upon them by their inquisitors? Numerous coastal witch confessions contain at least some elements of these migratory legends. A witch in Stronsay, Orkney, for instance, was indicted in 1633 for attempting to sink a ship by causing the captain and his son to suffer fits of madness while at sea. The men were saved by a fellow sailor who promptly threw a dog overboard, thus breaking the spell. The vengeful woman had allegedly been refused alms by the ship’s captain who also berated her “Awa wich, carling, devill a farthing ye will fa!”³⁶

Stories that looked back to the era of the witch-hunts could also acquire a folk narrative feel in the retelling. The eighteenth century legend of Stine Bheag o’ Tarbat, recorded from oral tradition by the great geologist and polymath Hugh Miller, is centred around weather-manipulation and a series of incidents at sea. Stine was blamed for raising a hurricane that killed her husband and son, to prevent them from reporting her to the presbytery at Tain for her participation at the Witches Sabbat. Living in a coastal area, where the Dornoch Firth meets the North Sea, she was believed to be behind other problems at sea, wrecking ships and creating storms. In 1738, a crew of fishermen were stranded at Tarbat Ness due to bad weather, and so they consulted Stine Bheag for she was “famous at this time as one in league with Satan, and much consulted by seafaring men when windbound in any of the neighbouring ports”. When the fishermen entered her “ruinous and weather-beaten” cottage, atop which croaked a raven, Stine was sitting on a stool in front of the fire and flinging handfuls of seaweed into the

³⁴ Mac Cárthaigh, “The Ship-Sinking Witch”, 279-80.

³⁵ Mac Cárthaigh, “The Ship-Sinking Witch”, 286.

³⁶ Mac Cárthaigh, “The Ship-Sinking Witch”, 284; Thomas Davidson, *Rowan Tree and Red Thread*, (Edinburgh, 1949) 29.

hearth while muttering a “Gaelic rhyme”. In the corner of the room was “a huge wooden trough, filled with water, from whence there proceeded a splashing bubbling noise, as if it were filled with live fish . . . and was sentinelled by a black cat, that sat purring on a stool beside it”. The fishermen asked her to favour them with a breeze to take them to Cromarty and so she asked for the stoup of the ship and obligingly performed a spell on it. The next day the men set sail for home.³⁷ Stine was, in many ways, the recognizable witch of legend and may be the consummate coastal witch.

Future Directions

Witchcraft is best understood as a set of core beliefs about magic, rather than proscribed magical or ritualistic activities. The essentials of witchcraft belief – such as its association with *maleficium*, or acts of harmful magic – remain the same but the individual acts of maleficence may differ depending upon the specific context. If a discrete category of “coastal witch” is to be discerned, much closer analysis of trial evidence, combined with intensive local historical study, will bring this into sharper focus. Charting the geographical distribution of witches from coastal areas would help to establish discernable patterns or concentrations of activity. Statistically, it would be useful to know what proportion of cases came from coastal zones, how many of those accused were found guilty or acquitted, and what the gender balance was among the accused? From existing data it is known that a high proportion of cases from the Highland region came from ports or other coastal parishes as well as close to the Highland-Lowland line. Was this also the pattern in the Lowlands? In the presbytery of Linlithgow, for example, cases predominated from coastal areas of the county, such as Bo’ness, which tried 28 suspects in 1679-80. Another notable feature of the Linlithgow trials was the relatively high demonic content. Furthermore, greater research into the relationship between superstition and coastal communities, most notably around fishing taboos and sea lore in general, would be helpful. Cross-cultural

³⁷ Hugh Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland*, (1835; Edinburgh, 1994) 269-76; Lizanne Henderson, “The Natural and Supernatural Worlds of Hugh Miller”, *Celebrating the Life and Times of Hugh Miller*, ed. Lester Borley (Cromarty, 2003) 89-98; Lizanne Henderson, “Folk Belief and Scottish Traditional Literature”, *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures*, eds. Sarah Dunnigan and Suzanne Gilbert (Edinburgh, 2013) 26-34.

comparative analysis of witch motifs from other coastal regions would establish if Scottish coastal witches were distinctive in any way from those of other nations? There are, as yet, no concentrated studies of Scottish coastal witches and witchcraft. This modest contribution makes no claim to fill that void but is intended to raise some thought-provoking questions and possible future directions.